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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC AFFAIRS U/S DISCUSSES COOPERATION WITH
USG, EFFORTS TO COMBAT EXTREMISM

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reasons: 1.4 (B)(D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Islamic Affairs Undersecretary Fareed Al-Muftah, a strong promoter of moderation in Islam, told the Ambassador he welcomes further cooperation with the USG on a variety of programs planned in the coming months. He outlined efforts he is undertaking to revise religious education in the public schools, with a focus on tolerance and shared religious values, and to introduce regulations aimed at keeping politics out of the mosques and limiting the ability of preacher politicians to deliver Friday sermons. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by PAO, called on Undersecretary for Islamic Affairs Dr. Fareed Al-Muftah April 24 to discuss Dr. Al-Muftah's continuing efforts to combat Muslim extremism in Bahrain and possibilities for future USG programming in this area. The Ambassador opened the discussion by asking about press reports that Dr. Al-Muftah had been working with the Ministry of Education on a new religious education curriculum that will be introduced in the public schools in the fall. Al-Muftah confirmed the report, saying that the revised curriculum focuses on tolerance and shared religious and moral values and combating radicalism and extremism in religion. The curriculum also aims at correcting misinformation within Islam (Sunni and Shia) and about other religions (e.g., Christianity). Al-Muftah said that there was significant support for the new curriculum within the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, but acknowledged that there was opposition from some Imams.

¶3. (C) In addition to the schools, Al-Muftah is also taking steps to address radical preaching in the mosques. Friday preachers should not, he said, get involved in politics and political issues. It is not helpful for preachers to talk in the mosques about sectarian issues during Friday sermons. He added that the Ministry was preparing new regulations that will keep parliamentarians who are also clerics from delivering sermons at mosques. These regulations will be based on similar regulations in Kuwait, and will be "clear and specific" on what is permitted. As these are regulations, not laws, he added, they would not require parliamentary approval.

¶4. (C) Asked about Bahrain's proposed new family law, Al-Muftah stated that there would be one broad law covering both Sunnis and Shia, but that there will be separate Sunni and Shia judges to handle cases for their respective sects.

¶5. (U) On the question of possible programming with USG assistance, especially with regard to cooperation on moderation and interfaith dialogue, Al-Muftah confirmed that his Ministry is proceeding with plans to hold a national seminar on moderation in June for Sunni and Shia clerics. He said that he has invited U.S. Imam Dr. Mohammed Bashar Arafat, who came to Bahrain under USG programming last October during Ramadan, to participate in the seminar. The

Ministry is panning a conference on interfaith dialogue in October/November and welcomes a U.S. speaker. The Embassy will initiate a speaker request. Al-Muftah welcomed an American Imam to visit Bahrain this Ramadan (following successful programming of American Imams during the last two Ramadans), and also welcomed a Voluntary Visitor program to send more clerics to the United States (similar to the successful program that sent four Bahraini Imams to the U.S. on a voluntary visitor program in June 2006). Finally, Al-Muftah said that the Ministry, using a USD 15,000 grant from the U.S., is about to publish three books on the theme of Islamic moderation.

16. (C) Comment: It is not always a popular cause in the mosques, but Fareed Al-Muftah since he was named Undersecretary two years ago has been steadfast in his support of Islamic moderation and interfaith dialogue. He also welcomes assistance from and cooperation with the U.S. We will continue to look for ways to cooperate with Dr. Al-Muftah and his Ministry.

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